

# Revelation, "Go and Sin No More" or~ by Dulcie Deamer

"The tambourines rattled louder and faster. Like one demented, with drawn brows and darting hands, she freed herself from the first of the clinging transparencies that swathed her. And from the shadow of the garlanded vermillion columns David watched her."



(Cont'd from Last Sunday.)

## CHAPTER V.

A SINGLE bronze lamp lit the long marble and malachite chamber of the dancing girls. Under this lamp and close to the peacock-blue, star-spangled curtains which had been drawn wide apart the girls huddled, talking and giggling.

The sun had set barely half an hour before, leaving the West smouldering like a charcoal hearth; but the Judean hills were cold and neutral colored now, and the first stars pricked the mild night.

Iris sat apart from the others on the carpet square, almost beyond the confines of the weak light of the single lamp. Her face was bent over an open box of olive wood in which she kept various small and intimate possessions.

From this box she took a ring, which she seemed to study, holding it in the palm of her hand. It was a silver band on which was mounted a golden scarab of the size of a man's thumb-nail. The fair, perfectly featured face of the girl was intent upon this ring.

It had been given to her nearly a year before by a Numidian archer of Herod's bodyguard who, a month or two later, had been scourged to death for poisoning his captain. He had pleaded with her one night with moist lips and eyes that glistened like an animal's, and she had obtained the ring from him and the secret of the ring.

It was a vehicle of death—unsuspected, subtle, certain. The golden scarab was hollow, and in the cavity was poison—the immortal poison with which the half-men of the African forest envenomed their arrows.

Among them it was known by the name of kome, and once it had entered the blood of man or woman death was certain after the passage of a few hours—death without the slightest warning or any antidote.

In the olive-wood box beside her knee was the scrap of silk in which the ring was always hidden.

Iris wrapped the ring in it again, keeping it in her lightly closed hand, shut the box, rose and crossed over to where the other girls crouched on their heels under the lamp that was set in a niche.

With them was Astarte, her auburn head filleted with silver and crowned with a silver-white aigrette. "My joints seem so stiff to-night," complained Helen, "and I rubbed myself with oil this morning till my palms burned—positively burned, girls."

"You're getting old, dear—that's the trouble," said Semla. "I hope Leander's there to wrestle for them—I feel that I shall dance well to-night."

"Oh, Leander—that Greek colt! May the gods grant me my Nubian—he's a man if you like!" "Valerius is sure to be there," said Amytis, the young Persian. "Whenever I think of Astarte smacking his face in the myrtle court this morning I want to laugh."

"Laugh!" said Helen. "It's the loveliest thing that's happened for half a year! Astarte, you little devil! I could kiss you for it. Take care the lion doesn't make a mouthful of you, child—nothing rouses a man quicker than a slap on the jaw."

Astarte laughed, rather breathlessly. She was very excited.

"I'm not afraid of him!" she said. "I told him I'd stab him if he touched me again."

"Oh, listen to her!" said Semla. "In a week you'll be showing us the rings and armlets he's given you."

"He's a fine figure of a man," said Helen. "You're a lucky girl. He'll be there to-night. Mind you tell us all about it to-morrow."

Iris had joined them, slipping quietly down upon her knees between Amytis and Astarte.

A gust of harp-music came to them. Everyone listened.

"Is it time for us?" said one.

Iris drew closer to Astarte and slid a smooch arm about her.

"You're nervous, aren't you?" she said.

"I know you are. Look, dear, I'll give you something my own sister shouldn't have. It's an amulet."

"My mother got it from an Egyptian woman whom she hid in her house when they were looking for her to stone her as a witch. You'll have nothing but good luck as long as you wear it, but be careful not to take it off."

"Wear it to-night, dear. I'll slip it on your hand."

From the scrap of silk she unrolled the scarabaeus ring that the Numidian archer had given her and fitted it deftly on to the forefinger of Astarte's right hand. Keeping the hand in her own she squeezed it, edging still closer to the other girl.

As Iris pressed her hand, nestling up to her, Astarte was barely conscious of the faintest, minutest prick. She was conscious of it, but her consciousness paid no heed to it.

Under the pressure of Iris's fondling hand a tiny needle point, hollow like a serpent's tooth, had pierced the skin, and the deadly African arrow-poison began, very slowly, to filter into the puncture, mingling with the blood.

"I wouldn't have given it to my own sister," purred Iris. "It's a wonderful amulet."

"She will not see another day. There is no antidote." Thus the thoughts of Iris ran. "Valerius may love her to-night, but it will not matter. To-morrow she will be dead, and the dead are forgotten as quickly as a kiss given in the dark."

"When she is gone he will desire me—there will be no one to distract him. I shall have him all to myself, and he will kiss me as he kissed her to-day. No one will know how she died, for there will be no mark upon her."

Astarte extended her right hand, on the forefinger of which was the gold and silver scarabaeus ring. She had never worn a ring before. The oblong golden facsimile of the sacred Egyptian beetle hid her finger to the first joint.

"Oh—Iris!" she said, "it's beautiful. I'll never take it off!"

"Hush!" said Iris. "I've given it to you because I love you already. It will bring you luck, dear."

The other girls had risen and were all leaning over the alabaster balustrade of the gallery upon which the chamber opened.

"Iris!" called one of them over her shoulder. "We must go down now. Oh, it's a sight!"

Astarte's heart seemed to jump to her throat. She was on her feet now and out in the open gallery that overlooked an inner court of the palace. A staircase led down into the court, half lit by a lamp placed at the head of it and by another at its foot.

Now she was on this staircase, descending, and Iris was with her, and Helen, and Semla. She gazed straight before her with widened eyes that did not blink, for it was more wonderful than any dream.

The court was in darkness, but behind six tall, fluted, vermillion columns, whose capitals were pairs of gilded lions' heads, was the hall of the feast, softly nebulous with light.

Veils of rosy gauze fell from the vermillion ceiling to the pavement of marble, and behind them stood massive, many-branched candelabra like silver trees, a lighted wick afloat in every cuplike socket. The tables were arranged in the form of

a horseshoe and set with lamp-stands hung with little pipkin-shaped silver lamps.

These lamps were filled with olive oil with which was mingled oil of roses. Garlands of orange blossom were suspended between the columns, mingling a subtler fragrance with the perfume that the lamps burned.

Negro and Syrian slaves came and went barefooted. Little tripping tame gazelles picked their way across the pure white floor, or stood as though dazzled by the soft glare of the innumerable, small, tongue-shaped flames.

The four dancing girls mounted two shallow steps, and passing between the vermillion columns sank down upon a strip of carpet, waiting.

Astarte sat bolt upright upon the carpet strip, biting her underlip to control the trembling of over-excitement.

In the house of Bel-Namri, the slave seller, she had appeared half sullen, and languid with the languor of one upon whose limbs tedium weighs like lead. Now she was awake, alive—a kindled flame, a vibrant nerve; clay hungry for the hand of the moulder.

Someone was looking at her. She turned her head a trifle and encountered the gaze of Valerius. His brows were bound with a gold fillet. A broad golden armlet caught the light upon his upper arm.

She had already received a blurred impression of men and women in cool white raiment reclining on couches on either side of the tables. If she was afraid of him it was a pleasurable fear. She was glad that he was there.

Light, perfume, the blatant coloring of the vermillion columns, the strangeness, the sound of harps, the cynical masculine gray eyes that seemed to measure her, stimulated her senses like a species of intoxication.

The harp music ceased. There was a clang of cymbals.

Astarte was aware that Iris and Helen had risen, one splendid as a shapely goddess, the other exquisite as an alabaster figurine. Their hair was elaborately dressed; their bodies, almond-white, seemed to reflect the light of the many lamp-flames behind the veils of rosy gauze as pale garden statues reflect the color of roses.

With the clean-cut precision of long practice they struck a mutual dramatic pose—one crouching, the other threatening—motionless as though frozen into stone.

## CHAPTER VI.

DAVID emerged from the reeking by-ways of the lower city. He was in a deserted street. To right and left stretched the wall that encircled the palace of Herod and its garden courts. Set into it was a low, straight door—a postern for secret business. Not a living thing moved.

The young man went right up to the door in the wall, led by the indeterminate starlight. There was no sound but the muffled, heavy beating of his own heart. He tried the door, pressing it. It was shut fast.

Drawing back a step or two he drove at it with his shoulder, and with a splintering sound the fastenings burst. David lunged forward through the narrow doorway into the precinct that the wall enclosed.

He brought up short, conscious of his bruised shoulder, but ignoring it. The fact that he had broken like a thief into the gardens of Herod, the Tetrarch, and ran a considerable risk of being taken by the guard and scourged did not occur to him.

He stood upon a paved way. Its pallid glimmer led straight on, and he went forward, moving with discretion. The perfume of orange blossom touched his nostrils.

The marble path broadened, di-

viding to encircle an octagonal fountain, bedded in iris and narcissus, whose central yet resembled a trembling silver spear. The

continuous, cool ripple of the water was delicious under the starlight. Cypress roses like black obelisks. At their feet were set pale stone benches.

Ahead there was light, soft, yellow, like amber or honey. The bacchic clang of cymbals reverberated.

Beyond an open colonnade, whose pallid pillar-shafts were like tall ghosts, a court lay, lit only by a pair of lamps placed one at the head and the other at the foot of a staircase that led down from a gallery; but at the farther end of this court the light flowed out between vermillion columns linked with garlands.

The words of the half-breed mercenary at the gate returned to David: "There's a feast to-night. Girls and wine."

Passing under the colonnade he entered the court, crossed it with extreme caution, keeping near the wall, and paused in the shadow of one of the vermillion columns, standing by it.

The light of the feast streamed past him. As he stood he could see without being seen by those within.

A pair of stripped girls were posturing in the midst of the floor. Nearer to the row of columns, upon a length of carpet, two other girls sat.

The red-golden head of the nearest of these two was filleted with silver. As she watched the posturers the very pose of her body was instinct with the breathless, thirsty interest of one to whose clear eyes all things are new.

David laid his hand on the fluted column, leaning against it, concentrating his gaze upon this girl. As he regarded her he saw purity as one sees it in a newly opened lily, and he prostrated himself in spirit before this purity.

Again the bacchic cymbals

changed. The posturers stood a moment like deer at gaze; then they ran back to the carpet, laughing, panting.

"Your Cretan's here, Semla," said Helen, working in a strand of her loosened hair with her finger and thumb.

"They've got him up at the table in a purple tunic, with gold armlets wider than the one Valerius wears and a wreath of myrtle. They'll spoil that boy if they start to make a pet of him—he'll think he's somebody. He's a conceited cub, anyhow."

There was the throbbing thud of a small, oblong, hand-beaten drum—like the heavy throb of desirous pulses—and the quick shake-shake of tambourines.

Semla rose. She wore the shortest possible glove-fitting jacket of gold tissue, ending just below her breasts, and from her loin-belt fell strips of white leather, sewn with little bells, and forming a species of skirt. There were bells at her wrists and ankles, also.

She ran out, tinkling, on to the cleared floor, stamped, and flung herself with wonderful zest and vitality into the stomach dance. For the first time since Astarte's interested eyes had lighted on her in the chamber embellished with malachite she seemed really awake.

David, leaning against the column in whose shadow he stood, turned his eyes to the dancer only for an instant.

He had glimpsed the stomach dance many times through the open doors of dissolute houses where dancing girls were kept. When he paused to watch it—halted and held by an undercurrent of the baser sort of curiosity—it had revolted him even as he watched, though a lower chord had vibrated, responsive, in defiance of his will.

A stinging flush of anger took him. If he could, he would have interposed a curtain of darkness between the auburn-headed girl with the aigrette and the stamping, tinkling dancer who stripped passion of all disguise, shredding from it the beauty—the ardent spirit that is clean as fire.

She seemed to regard the dancer as a young child might regard the graven symbols of a shrine—serenely, unspiculously. This inviolate innocence shamed him, inflamed

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